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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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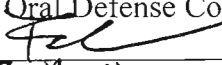
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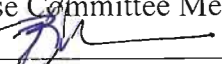
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## *Executive Summary*

**Title:** *SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES FOR THE UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES: AN ISRAELI CASE STUDY*

**Author:** Major Marcus A. Cunningham, USAF

**Thesis:** Although social media is an increasingly important tool for reaching out to various public audiences at home and around the world, the Department of Defense is unlikely to reform its strategic communication doctrine to use social media more effectively unless it is directed to do so by national civilian leadership or it experiences a significant military failure.

**Discussion:** The US military is facing pressure to adapt to a rapidly evolving information environment. Its adversaries are already using social media to recruit, train, and organize forces across borders. Nevertheless, the DoD resisted significant change by refusing to participate in social media until 2010, and then adapted old Public Affairs doctrine to this new technology. These actions are consistent with theories on military innovation, which predict that significant innovation usually requires the motivating forces of military failure or civilian intervention. Israel's evolution in the use of social media from 2006 through Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012 provides a useful case study in how institutions might adapt to use social media as a strategic communication tool. Again, consistent with innovation theory, Israel's progress in social media springs from its failure to achieve its strategic objectives in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, despite having accomplished its military objectives. Concluding that it needed to perform better in its national strategic communication and military information operations, Israel made two broad organizational changes that are generally applicable to our situation: it centralized its national communication structure and created a social media unit with enough independence to optimize its efforts to the social media environment. In the case of the US, neither Iraq nor Afghanistan is seen as a significant failure to merit widespread reform of either military Public Affairs or Information Operations, which means that significant reform must come from senior civilian leadership. While recommendations for reform have been suggested in different forms by the Government Accountability Office, the Defense Science Board, and the RAND Corporation, most initiatives lack the necessary support from civilian leadership. Without significant reform, the military's attempts to innovate through such initiatives as social media outreach teams have predictably fallen short.

**Conclusion:** Because of significant institutional barriers to innovation in the military's strategic communication structure, our current social media policies and strategic communication doctrine are likely to persist into the foreseeable future.

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THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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## *Preface*

*“Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the changes in the character of war, not upon those who wait to adapt themselves after the changes occur.”* – Italian Air Marshal Giulio Douhet

Sun Tzu noted that, despite its violence and fundamentally physical nature, warfare ends up being largely a cognitive endeavor. Just as the pace of industrial and technological innovation changed the character of war over the last century and a half, the information revolution is changing the way that human beings interact. People create, transmit, and consume information in ways that are both banal and transformative. Even with Israel providing a clear model for reform and a variety of reports advocating innovation, the military has mostly used social media to conduct traditional media activities. Until the military experiences a clear failure during a military operation due to an adversary’s use of social media, it will make no significant organizational changes to adapt to the new information environment.

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr Rebecca Johnson, for her guidance, support, and mentorship (not to mention her assistance with Twitter etiquette). This project was sponsored by the Commandant’s Special Interest Group, and I can only hope that it provides some insight for that organization. It was originally intended to be specific to the Marine Corps, but as I explored the issue, it rapidly became apparent that the institutional structures that both enable and constrain social media use are not service specific. I would like to especially thank Dr Benjamin Jensen for a strong re-vector and LtCol(ret) Ric Wyatt in J-39 for his willingness to answer my questions and connect me with knowledgeable MISO operators across the globe. Finally, as always, I want to acknowledge the patience and support of my family, Maj Michele A. Lobianco and Charlotte Cunningham, as I struggled to find something interesting to say about this difficult and slippery subject.

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## *Introduction*

The internet has changed the information environment in profound ways, particularly through the rise of social networks and other internet-based platforms known collectively as social media. The term “social media” is trendy and often misunderstood, especially given that the same platforms and technologies are sometimes described by the nearly-synonymous terms ‘new media’ and ‘Web 2.0.’ Simply defined, social media is “electronic communication platforms that convey content generated and exchanged by networks of users.”<sup>1</sup> But even simple systems can create complex and unpredictable results. This simple term actually describes a bewildering array of applications, on several seemingly-unrelated platforms. These include: *blogs* (Blogspot, LiveJournal), *forums* (Yahoo! Answers, Epinions), *media sharing* (Flickr, YouTube, Digg, Reddit), *microblogs* (Twitter, fourspace), and *social networks* (Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn).<sup>2</sup>

The US military has multiple reasons to adapt to this evolving information environment. Social media is changing the way companies interact with consumers, individuals interact with government, and citizens interact with each other. America’s ideological competitors, such as al Qaeda, are already exploiting social media to mobilize adherents and spread their messages to new audiences. The American government has repeatedly recognized the important role of public communication in modern military affairs. During World War I, President Wilson oversaw the creation of the Committee on Public Information to promote the war at home and advocate Wilson’s “vision of an international order” overseas.<sup>3</sup> FDR created the Office of War Information during World War II to counter nationalist movements, and we relied on the US Information Agency to counter communism during the Cold War.<sup>4</sup> Despite ten years of war, however, the US government has not created an agency similar in scope and size to counter the

radical Islamist ideology that motivates al Qaeda and the Taliban. The Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) attempts to address extremism, but it does not conduct centralized planning and is a cooperative rather than authoritative organization.

In the ideological struggle with ideological extremism, US military has largely ceded the social media battleground. Instead of exploring innovative ways to use this new media, it has belatedly and hesitantly incorporated social media into its existing doctrinal structures. Israel's evolution in the use of social media as a response to the Second Lebanon War in 2006 through Operation Pillar of Defense provides a useful contrasting case study in how institutions might adopt social media as a strategic communication tool. Though Israeli *hasbara* reflects a highly specific response to Israel's strategic environment, we can generalize its main features as centralizing government communication programs and allowing social media units to operate with wide creative latitude. Because of its social media innovations, the Israeli military has better political-military integration with its national government, which has led to more satisfactory performance in its recent conflicts.

Institutionally, the US military contains a variety of agencies, offices, and people who are responsible for communicating American values and intentions in order to secure the support of various domestic and foreign audiences. The more-or-less abstract summation of all of these activities is referred to as Strategic Communication (SC), though this term typically describes the process rather than the apparatus. Despite Israel's example and a number of recommendations for the US to reform its strategic communication structure, the US military has resisted the significant institutional changes necessary to adapt to this new reality.<sup>5</sup> This resistance will be difficult for reformers to overcome because the normal causes of military innovation (military

failure or a strong civilian push for change) are missing. Without additional momentum for change, the current system will persist.

### **Forces Driving Institutional Innovation**

Military innovation is an increasingly important area of military studies. Not every change in technology requires a change in how the military operates, so the DoD must decide whether social media is the kind of technology that requires an innovative response. Two major factors argue that it is. First, the rapidly changing nature of the information environment itself is causing drastic societal changes, with widespread effects on both individual and organizational behavior. These changes affect all organizations that communicate, whether those institutions are companies adjusting marketing strategies or governments changing the way they deliver governmental services. Second, this problem has a distinct military aspect. The US continues to engage in military operations worldwide to combat terrorists inspired by a particular strain of fundamental Islamism, and who already use social media aggressively to pursue their ideological agenda. Moreover, our strategic rivals (Russia and China, for instance) are investing in social media as a significant component in their strategic influence strategies.<sup>6</sup> Failing to innovate cedes a critical ideological battleground to our current and possibly future foes. These two driving forces should create strong incentives for the military to adapt its approach to fully utilize the emerging power of social media.

Barry Posen, in his groundbreaking discussion of military doctrine, explains that military innovations (or stagnation) can affect national security in two areas: “First, they can affect [political-military] integration; second, they can affect the likelihood of victory and defeat.”<sup>7</sup> In general, political-military integration is important because it aligns the ends of grand strategy

with the military means to achieve them.<sup>8</sup> Posen argues that, because it creates operational uncertainty, true military innovation is and should be rare. Because of this uncertainty and attendant risk, “a new technology will normally be assimilated to an old doctrine rather than stimulate change to a new one.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, though militaries can sometimes innovate through experimentation, they are much more likely to innovate when they have either suffered a significant defeat or when they are forced to innovate by their civilian leadership.<sup>10</sup> Posen’s observations on military innovation are vital to understanding the difference between the social media approaches of Israel and the US.

There are several reasons that the US military might be tempted to discount social media as a technological force that requires an innovative approach. For one thing, the military might be tempted to dismiss social media as merely new, rather than revolutionary. This can be seen by the DoD’s decision to add social media to existing Public Affairs (PA) programs rather than fundamentally changing its approach to SC.<sup>11</sup> The growing academic consensus, however, is that social media reflects a change in the underlying dynamics of how people communicate with each other in the internet age. As social media expert Clary Shirky explains, its reliance on user-generated content and un-intermediated distribution fundamentally change the communication structure: “Whereas the phone gave us the one-to-one pattern, and television, radio, magazines, books, gave us the one-to-many pattern, the Internet gives us the many-to-many pattern.”<sup>12</sup> This relatively simple change will have profound effects, just as the printing press did more than merely accelerate the process of transcribing books by hand. There are already tantalizing hints of future applications of social media, such as providing real-time information during the Haiti humanitarian relief operation or an Israeli teenager’s handheld missile warning application.

While many of these effects will be hard to anticipate, social media has already reduced our dependence on information gatekeepers and mediators. Whereas until recently, most media was produced by professionals, “members of the former audience...can now also be producers.”<sup>13</sup> The process does not simply replace professionals with amateurs, however. As Shirky notes, it undermines and changes the very definition of media: “the Internet also becomes the mode of carriage for all other media... that means that every medium is right next door to every other medium...media is increasingly less just a source of information, and it is increasingly more a site of coordination.”<sup>14</sup> Because it allows unprecedented cooperation and coordination, social media continues to defy traditional structures, such as the emergence of ‘crowdsourcing’ as a viable alternative to bank business lending or venture capital investment.

This re-distribution of creative power presents a challenge to large organizations, which used to be able to use their advantage in resources to gain access to the gatekeepers of traditional mass media. For example, corporations are similar to the military in that they are top-down and hierarchically-organized organizations, and they have struggled to adapt to a bottom-up and chaotic/complex social media. This is a particularly acute problem for advertising, and it has led a frenzy of marketers trying to leverage social media as “the new word of mouth, long the gold standard in marketing.”<sup>15</sup> They have yet to see a significant payoff. Part of the reason, which is equally applicable to the military’s use of social media for public communication, is that “it’s hard to know what to count. What’s the value of a Facebook “like” or Twitter follower? ... What action can I take to get the response I want?”<sup>16</sup> The military faces these exact problems, and it has struggled to figure out how to use social media as an effective communication tool.

The second reason to take an innovative approach to social media is that, because of its accessibility, it is an increasingly important information battleground. The last century provides

ample evidence that wars have an information component, and that the military has a significant stake in the information battlespace. From WWI through the end of the Cold War, the government has traditionally created institutions to create propaganda to shore up public support and erode enemy morale. While the American public has always been uncomfortable with these institutions, and while they are disintegrated as soon as their ideological opponents have been defeated, today's conflicts have their own ideological components.<sup>17</sup> In fact, SC is a vital part of counterinsurgency theory and information is often "decisive."<sup>18</sup> Approaches that focus primarily on kinetic action are unlikely to succeed in the long run. General McChrystal succinctly summarized this imperative when he noted: "you can kill [them] forever...because they are not a finite number."<sup>19</sup> Therefore, an analysis of both historical precedent and current requirements makes a compelling case for emphasizing SC as a vital military function, and for emphasizing social media as a vital part of the SC effort.

Our Islamist adversaries recognize the importance of social media as a military tool already. As former Islamic extremist Maajid Nawaz explains, social media inherently favors extremists groups and ideas over traditional democratic states because it allows people with extreme ideas to communicate and cooperate in ways that were impossible before the internet age.<sup>20</sup> In particular, Islamic fundamentalists use social media as "a tool for radicalization and recruitment, a method of propaganda distribution, a means of communication, and ground for training."<sup>21</sup> Ayman al-Awlaki "operated his own blog and was active on several social networking sites, and his supporters set up pages on Facebook and MySpace."<sup>22</sup> His young disciples are creating "Counter Counter Terrorism" strategies to "make al Qaeda's radical ideology more accessible... helping the group transcend its image as a brutal terrorist organization and attract a much broader spectrum of followers, particularly in the West."<sup>23</sup> Like

junk mail and internet spam, terrorist messages only need to resonate with a small percentage of recipients in order to produce the desired effect. Social media provides this medium, as well as a way of organizing extremist activities once extremists have identified sympathizers.

Perhaps one reason that the military has not been particularly involved in social media until recently is that it is seen as a force for good in the world, or that its inherently distributed nature encourages democracy and liberalism—the kinds of ideals that America supports. Certainly, activists and revolutionaries have embraced social media as a force for positive change in the world, breathlessly claiming that it is responsible for the Arab Spring. Yet there are significant reasons to think that blind enthusiasm may be largely misplaced.<sup>24</sup> Malcolm Gladwell noted that, long before it was used to describe the protests of Tahrir Square, the phrase “Twitter Revolution” was applied to protests in Iran and Moldova, both of which were ruthlessly crushed.<sup>25 26</sup> Detractors also note that social media may not be terribly effective at actually generating widespread support for many political issues without the ‘support’ of the mainstream mass media.<sup>27</sup> More strikingly, Facebook was actually used effectively by Bahrain to organize reprisals against protestors.<sup>28</sup> Evgeny Morozov, in a book entitled *The Net Delusion*, describes how oppressive regimes have harnessed the supposedly democratizing force of social media to monitor and suppress dissent. Ultimately, social media is amoral—it is not an unambiguous “tool of democratization.” Rather, it is a tool that can be used for any number of purposes.

Despite having ample motivation to adjust its communication structure to better utilize social media, the US military didn’t make a significant effort to change its policies regarding social media until 2010, and it took another two years to formalize those changes with an actual DoD Directive that covered social media policy.<sup>29</sup> This certainly begs the question of why the DoD has not pursued more serious changes in its approach to social media SC. It would be easy

to dismiss this as the result of a hidebound organization that is uncomfortable with soft power and sees social media more as a liability than an asset. One could judge the veracity of that position better if there were some way of knowing what kinds of changes the military would need to make to truly incorporate social media as an important part of the SC structure. Fortunately, Israel's approach to social media provides just such an example.

### **Israeli Case Study**

If the US military's integration of social media into its SC structure has been hesitant and gradual, Israel has rapidly and aggressively created a military presence on various social media platforms. As Posen predicts, Israel's path towards innovation in social media began with an embarrassing public failure. What makes this particular failure, the Second Lebanon War of 2006, so interesting is that the military operation was largely successful in seizing territory and killing Hezbollah operatives. Yet this military success did not translate into strategic victory. Once the fighting stopped, Israel realized that it was losing the information war, and it started trying to improve its ability to communicate Israel's position to the outside world.<sup>30</sup> As a result of this crisis and subsequent events, Israel made two fundamental organizational changes to make its social media unit the centerpiece of its overall SC structure.

The Second Lebanon War occurred in the context of its ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, which prompted Hezbollah to conduct a brazen attack in 2006. This time period is critical because it occurred at the inflection point where social media emerged as a legitimate alternative to traditional mass media. The conflict started when Hezbollah attacked an Israeli checkpoint, in what was probably meant to be a brazen but minor military action. Israel, however, responded with a full-scale armored incursion into Lebanon. In the ensuing conflict,

Israel was accused of war crimes after conducting strikes against militants mingled with civilians. Despite the facts that Israel was responding to aggression, receiving indiscriminate rocket fire, and conducting strikes on legitimate military targets, Hezbollah's tight control of journalist access succeeded in promoting its narrative of Israeli "disproportionality."<sup>31</sup> As a result of international pressure, Israel eventually withdrew. After the conflict, content analysis showed that while Arab media was predictably biased, the Western media also tended to portray Israel as the aggressor and describe the action as disproportionate.<sup>32</sup>

The Israeli public's disappointment with this turn of events quickly led to reports demanding significant structural changes to adjust to the new media landscape. What made this time different from the past had been the way that information environment no longer allowed Israel to control the situation by controlling access to the battlespace. In addition to this asymmetry in the international news media, the "new media" blogosphere had an unprecedented impact on the media coverage of the war (discovering cases of 'fauxtography,' for instance), that made it the first truly 'live' war in history:<sup>33</sup>

...the information battlefield played a central role. Here the Israelis suffered from the openness of their democratic society. They succumbed to the public pressures of live 24/7 coverage. They couldn't keep a secret. Hezbollah, on the other hand, controlled its message with an iron grip. It had one spokesman and no leaks. Hezbollah did not have to respond to criticism from bloggers, and it could always count on unashamedly sympathetic Arab reporters to blast Israel for its "disproportionate" military attack against Lebanon.<sup>34</sup>

Israel's immediate response to its own failure to adapt to the new environment was to intentionally redesign the entire national information structure, which clarified roles and responsibilities within the Israeli government in an attempt to make the system work efficiently.

While this institutional change was immediate, Israel's emphasis on social media was more of an evolutionary process. Because of a certain amount of top-level resistance, social media evolved slowly—a "'pet project' that took on a life of its own."<sup>35</sup> Aliza Landes is largely

credited with founding the IDF's social media program by writing several proposals to her superiors to advocate for new initiatives. Her proposals were largely ignored until another crisis demonstrated social media's potential.<sup>36</sup> This conflict, Operation Cast Lead in 2009, prompted Israel to embed "camera crews with its infantry teams because it was worried that those infantry teams would be accused of war crimes."<sup>37</sup> Without apparently notifying anybody, "a young group of American Israelis in the IDF Public Affairs Unit decided to...upload them to YouTube... Unexpectedly, they became YouTube smashes and racked up several million views apiece."<sup>38</sup> This unexpected success led to the expansion of the "New Media Unit," which was almost immediately tested by yet another crisis. This incident, where Israeli commandos killed several peace protesters on the Mavi Marvari in 2010, was highly successful despite the fact that its veracity was challenged by social media activists, who demonstrated that Israel selectively edited the video to portray the protesters as aggressors, rather than the commandos.<sup>39</sup> The tantalizing successes of Israel's social media response highlighted its importance in Israel's communication structure.

Israel's social media unit has become the most visible part of the IDF's SC structure, and is distinguished by its increasingly aggressive "voice." Its aggressive approach was famously demonstrated by Operation Pillar of Defense, which started when Israel announced the targeted killing of Hamas military leader Ahmed al-Jabari on Twitter, while simultaneously posting the airstrike video on YouTube.<sup>40</sup> The Twitter post included a red-tinged poster of Jabari with "ELIMINATED" written in large white letters.<sup>41</sup> They followed it up with a warning on Twitter: "We recommend no Hamas operatives, whether low level or senior leaders, show their faces above ground in the days ahead."<sup>42</sup> Hamas responded through its military wing, the Al-Qassam Brigades, "Our blessed hands will reach your leaders and soldiers wherever they are (You

Opened Hell Gates on Yourselves.)”<sup>43</sup> Al Qassam announced each barrage on Twitter, and both sides posted pictures of dead children.<sup>44</sup> The IDF Spokesman team seemed surprised to be engaging Hamas and the al Qassam Brigades directly on Twitter, and some criticized Israel’s information activities as being in poor taste or as inappropriate for a nation-state.<sup>45</sup>

As opposed to the gradualist approach of the US military, Israel’s approach qualifies as true innovation. Military innovation is something that “changes the manner in which military formations function in the field...is significant in scope and impact...[and] is tacitly equated with greater military effectiveness.”<sup>46</sup> Israel’s approach meets all of these criteria. By creating a separate social media unit, the IDF changed the manner in which it organized its military functions during actual military operations. Moreover, this operational change has been significant in its scope and impact because it uses kinetic operations to support the overall SC strategy, rather than using SC to explain kinetic operations. Finally, despite receiving a fair amount of external criticism for both the Mavi Marvari incident and Operation Pillar of Defense, Israel’s leadership and citizens generally agree that these changes have succeeded in promoting Israel’s side of the story and thereby achieving Israel’s national objectives.<sup>47</sup>

It is important to note that innovation may be successful if it improves performance without leading directly to a highly visible “victory.” For example, social media’s measurability means that its “battles” can have declared winners and losers. One recent analysis used ‘hashtag’ popularity to conclude that Hamas ‘won’ that war (#GazaUnderAttack received 170,000 mentions in one day, compared to 25,000 for #IsraelUnderFire).<sup>48</sup> This analysis also qualitatively critiqued Israel’s social media approach: “the IDF did not engage the Twitterverse and merely sent out tweets (unlike Hamas, which encouraged conversation with its activity).”<sup>49</sup> Another highly specific criticism claimed that: “it failed to use hashtags in a ‘uniform and consistent way

during the course of the operation.’ This meant that only direct followers would see all the tweets, while others got lost in the onslaught.”<sup>50</sup> Yet these critiques do not necessarily impugn Israel’s approach. For one thing, Israel faces a logistical dilemma—its relatively small media team was dealing with up to 170,000 replies per day.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, these kinds of specific critiques can be used to improve future performance, and they would have been impossible to gain if the IDF had not engaged Hamas on the digital front.

### **Social Media Policy and Strategic Communication**

In laying the groundwork for studying military innovation, Posen studied military doctrine because doctrine specifies “how military forces should be structured and employed to respond to recognized threats and opportunities.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the first step in evaluating the US response to social media is analyzing its structures and policies. Until 2010, the military’s main response to the rise of social media was to ban it on government computers and discourage its use by military personnel.<sup>53</sup> Definitive guidance was finally released in September of 2012, in the form of DoDI 8550.01, *DoD Internet Services and Internet-Based Capabilities*. This document codified rules set down in a 2010 directive memorandum,<sup>54</sup> which for the first time allowed military members access to social media sites on government computers and also established guidelines for the use of social media by military organizations.<sup>55</sup> This instruction creates the institutional boundaries that mostly determine the ways that the military will approach social media for the immediate future, and it reflects the basic divisions that create institutional resistance to change.

This system essentially pastes social media onto the military’s Public Affairs (PA) program, supplementing their traditional mass media responsibilities with social media. Public

Affairs are defined as “those public information, command information, and community engagement activities directed toward both the external and internal publics with interest in the Department of Defense.”<sup>56</sup> Only military organizations that are authorized to have an “external official presence” are authorized to have an official social media presence. This system creates an official review process to ensure that information meets appropriate standards for information assurance and operational security purposes. Units must register their presence to a central database and are expected to fully comply with all website terms of service. Unless something goes wrong, commanders are not subject to extraordinary scrutiny of their media activity.

By making social media primarily a PA function, the military has placed significant restrictions on both its intended audiences and the nature of its content. Notably, the *US Army Social Media Handbook* describes the primary intended audiences of social media as: “Soldiers, Families, Veterans, Army Civilians, and the general public.”<sup>57</sup> This excludes foreign audiences, adversaries, and the leadership of other countries. Diplomats communicate with foreign leadership, and the State Department communicates with foreign populations through Public Diplomacy (PD). The military’s other primary military communication function is Information Operations (IO), which deals primarily with adversaries but overlaps with PD by communicating with select foreign audiences. The joint definition of IO is “to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.”<sup>58</sup> Of IO’s various core competencies, PSYOP is the most relevant. This discipline is sometimes synonymous with propaganda and often associated with airdropping leaflets, though it is trying to alter those preconceptions. Tellingly, in a “meta-PSYOP,” its name was recently changed to Military Information Support Operations (MISO).<sup>59</sup>

Though this division seems superficially simple, it is part of a complicated and confused system. Because of their association with propaganda, operational MISO units operate under very tight restrictions, and are often strictly segregated from PA. MISO assets are organized, trained, and equipped primarily through the Army and Air Force via US Special Operations Command.<sup>60</sup> Operationally, they are used by the combatant commanders, who submit MISO plans to the Secretary of Defense via the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy with coordination from the joint staff. Commanders at all levels coordinate PA with MISO as staff functions, though PA efforts are coordinated through the Assistant Secretary of Defense for PA. For local commanders, information efforts are supposed to be coordinated through an Information Operations Working Group.

A recent DoD definition of SC describes it as a process that “both informs and influences, synchronizing and deconflicting PA and IO themes and messages.”<sup>61</sup> This parochial use of the term conflicts with the use of that term to describe the federal government’s overall approach. The White House’s 2010 Strategic Communication Framework defines SC as:

(a) the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences, as well as (b) programs and activities deliberately aimed at communicating and engaging with intended audiences, including those implemented by public affairs, public diplomacy, and information operations professionals<sup>62</sup>

The confusion surrounding appropriate terminology complicates important relationships in the already complex information environment at the interagency level. The State Department is responsible for Public Diplomacy, which is defined as: “government-sponsored programs intended to inform or influence public opinion in other countries.”<sup>63</sup> PD is a complementary and sometimes conflicting activity to both PA and MISO, distinguishable from traditional diplomacy in that it is transparent, directed towards wide foreign audiences, and is concerned with the attitudes and behaviors of those public audiences.<sup>64</sup>

The government's current structure institutionalizes a system very much like the Israeli system prior to 2006, with several uncoordinated agencies communicating with various publics. Moreover, this system divides the world up into audiences. PA covers the American public, MISO targets a small number of adversaries, and PD supposedly covers broad foreign publics. Unfortunately, within this system, military PA actually has the preponderance of resources, which weights the government's communication effort towards its own public but also strongly drives the overall approach to a neutral, "inform"-only format. This system is certainly not really bad, but it is also not optimal. Again, Israel's case argues for two major organizational changes: aligning all of its information capabilities within a centralized structure and creating separate social media units with wide latitude. Though neither of these seems terribly difficult, the military has continued to resist any doctrinal changes due to organizational conservatism and the civilian leadership does not seem inclined to spend the necessary political to change the military system from above.

### **Military Doctrine and Social Media**

Posen presents several reasons that the military tends to be conservative when it comes to innovation. For one thing, military organizations seem to instinctively resist change because "individuals develop a vested interest in the distribution of power and in the purposes it protects."<sup>65</sup> But innovation also increases "operational uncertainty," which causes doubt in the minds of commanders and could degrade combat effectiveness if the organization gets caught between doctrines during a war.<sup>66</sup> Also, when it comes to social media, there are legal and doctrinal restrictions that prevent the US military from fully utilizing social media. Reforming the military SC structure would either move some social media from PA to MISO, or erase some

of the distinction between informing and influencing various audiences. And, while the IDF's experience could serve as an example, "military organizations have a hard time learning about the operational implications of new technology from the wars of other military organizations."<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, as Posen's theory predicts, the US military has mostly assimilated this new technology into its existing communication doctrine.

There are good reasons to think that the format of social media is a better match for MISO than for PA. IO is generally treated as a "fire" in the military planning process, which emphasizes identifying targets, desired effects, optimal weapons platforms, and battle damage. Social media is well-suited to that paradigm because it allows robust data analysis to identify target audiences with a great deal of precision and use that same data to analyze the effectiveness of its operations. Conversely, PA is primarily a staff function. While it is concerned with the same things, its model still relies of a broadcast format and widely dispersed audiences. Even the Army's Social Media Handbook describes a target audiences that involves millions of people associated with the Army, and the hundreds of millions of people in the American public. But perhaps the most important reason to think that MISO is a better fit is because social media favors idiosyncratic voices and interesting content. Despite having its own production facilities, the DoD's official YouTube channel, "DoDLive," has just over 4,000 subscribers. Meanwhile, a single private YouTube video depicting a short firefight has drawn over 24 million views.<sup>68</sup>

Doctrinally, however, military PA is highly motivated to avoid anything that the public might interpret as propaganda. Joint Publication 3-61, *Public Affairs*, states in boldface that: **"Propaganda has no place in DOD PA programs."**<sup>69</sup> This is an actual legal obligation because defense appropriation bills typically include a so-called 'propaganda rider': "Funds available to the Department of Defense may not be obligated or expended for publicity or propaganda

purposes within the United States not otherwise specifically authorized by law.”<sup>70</sup> The law does not actually define propaganda, though the military chooses to define it in JP 3-61 as “adversary communication, especially of a biased or misleading nature, designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly.”<sup>71</sup> Since PA controls the major social media outlets, and because its function is traditionally to “inform” rather than “influence,” it is unlikely to strongly advocate on behalf of the military the way that IDFSpokesperson does.

The law’s lack of specificity could allow for a great deal of latitude within the DoD, since the law does not place any explicit restriction on the content of PA activities so long as they remain truthful. Yet the military has sometimes tended to restrict its own activities, as seen in a prominent 2004 memorandum from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS) Richard Meyers, which prohibited PA and IO offices from being physically integrated.<sup>72</sup> This directive was widely interpreted by the services and commanders to strictly segregate the two activities.<sup>73</sup> In practice, this leads to a division of labor where PA addresses domestic and foreign audiences (primarily through interacting with traditional media) and MISO addresses adversaries.<sup>74</sup> In practice, the division between PA and MISO is interpreted as the division between overt and covert information activities (which include misinformation, disinformation, etc.).<sup>75</sup> Because MISO can use these ‘black’ or ‘grey’ techniques, it is highly restricted. Significantly, until 2007, PSYOP units were not allowed to conduct any internet activities whatsoever.<sup>76</sup>

Additionally, the current system’s bureaucratic structure has several inefficiencies and seems to perform its integrative function poorly. This creates opportunities for conflict because PA plans and policies are routed through the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and MISO plans are coordinated through the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy. A recent

conflict demonstrates how complex the situation can be. The Assistant Secretary for PA recently decided to eliminate the “strategic communication” term and discontinue that program on the Joint Staff, replacing SC with “strategic synchronization.”<sup>77</sup> This move, which created additional confusion, has been described as a bureaucratic power play because the ASD/PA isn’t in the position to make policy on SC.<sup>78</sup> Second, because the Joint Staff structure places the Geographic Combatant Commands who conduct MISO under a separate chain of command from the Chiefs of Staff, integrating plans and policies becomes problematic because the Secretary of Defense is the first common point in those chains. This episode highlights how awkward doctrine creates sub-optimal structures that keep the military’s primary information-related functions separate, and provides an example of what Posen might describe as organizational turf protection.

Because of the legal hurdles involved with changing these roles, innovation would be difficult but not impossible. Ceding responsibility for social media directly to MISO units would require a significant shift of resources to accommodate the additional workload, as well as a significant effort to ensure that MISO units receive the specific authorities to do so. It would make much more sense to relax the restrictions that restrict the PA personnel who control social media units, either by allowing them more creative control by widening the scope of their mandate or by seconding MISO personnel to act in an advisory capacity. An influential RAND study is currently driving a sea change in the Army’s approach to IO and MISO by pointing out that in the new media environment, “the lack of PA-MISO coordination has resulted in repeated instances of “information fratricide,” in which the separate capabilities provide conflicting information.”<sup>79</sup> From this perspective “all communications seek to influence, and that is OK.”<sup>80</sup> Since the vast majority of MISO operations use truthful information, a more explicitly

integration would not detract from PA's credibility. Of course, PA traditionalists advocate for a continued strict segregation between the two.

The doctrinal evolution surrounding SC highlights the difficulty the US military has encountered in trying to clarify the appropriate roles of PA and MISO. First, after years of effort and a promised forthcoming effort to publish a DoD instruction on SC, efforts to come to grips with both the term and its application appear to have failed completely.<sup>81</sup> Second, IO doctrine appears to be evolving backwards. In the ideal situation, the DoD publishes joint doctrine, which informs service-level doctrine. But in the case of IO, the Army has just released service doctrine that departs significantly from the recently-published joint publication. Army Field Manual 3-13, *Inform and Influence Activities*, was published in January of 2013, and it reflects RAND's recommendations to re-think basic IO structure. Under this new formulation, the Army separates "inform and influence activities" (IIA) that target the cognitive processes of its audience from the technical "cyber electromagnetic activities."<sup>82</sup> This formulation puts IO and PA into the same sphere, and reduces some of the verbal distance between the two activities, but continues to divide the world up into inform and influence efforts.<sup>83</sup> Because MISO is primarily an Army function, this Field Manual will likely drive a similar change in the joint doctrine, but will probably result in no substantive changes.

In contrast, when Israel reformed its national communication organizations, the IDF was forced to evolve in order to accommodate an independent social media presence. This was easier for the IDF in part because, unlike American PA, the IDF does not make a hard distinction between "inform" and "influence." Currently, the IDF's social media cell is one of four separate media relations teams. Aside from the social media branch, one unit deals with domestic media, another with the foreign press, and a third with the Jewish diaspora.<sup>84</sup> Originally, the foreign

press branch contained the new/interactive media branch, but it was allowed its independence after its successes during Operation Cast Lead. The unit works across multiple platforms in multiple languages, and has two main lines of effort. The first is directly through the interactive media branch, and the second is through the outreach effort made by various individuals on separate social media accounts.<sup>85</sup> Their goal is to “increase our legitimacy, to be transparent, and ... to combat misinformation ... from inside Gaza.”<sup>86</sup> Most importantly, the unit is granted the autonomy to advocate the Israeli position.

Both the philosophy and structure of the IDFSpokesperson is a significant departure from the American model, which divides its effort according to the intent behind the communication rather than the target audience. The IDF has even set up a specialized media fusion center to collect, examine, and release important information, such as targeted killing video of Jabari, directly to the social media unit. This “war room,” gives “the IDF the information edge as the first side in the war to give its record of events.”<sup>87</sup> The processing time for making combat footage ready for social media publication has decreased from 14 hours during the Mavi Marmara incident to just four hours for the Jabari attack.<sup>88</sup> This center was developed with the express intention of circumventing traditional mass media. The IDF’s social media unit chief during Operation Pillar of Defense said that his approach specifically sought to avoid media bias and “cut out the middleman of ‘old media’ in communicating with pro-Israel activists.”<sup>89</sup>

### **Changing Organizational Structures and Roles**

Because of the military’s inability or unwillingness reform its own doctrine, innovation will require an external force. Since the American military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan are not widely regarded as failures in the same way that the Second Lebanon War was viewed as

a military failure, this external force must come from the national civilian leadership. Policy experts at the GAO, the DSB, and RAND have all advocated for significant changes in the way the US conducts its national-level SC efforts.<sup>90</sup> Despite these studies and Congressional legislation designed to force the President to create a national SC strategy, the national political leadership has been willing to make the necessary changes to reform the military SC doctrine.

Because of its military failure, Israel's civilian leadership not only reformed the military but created the national political structures that made military innovation possible. As a direct result of its failures during the Second Lebanon War, Israel was forced to reign in its "hydra-headed" apparatus after receiving a starkly critical report of its media activities.<sup>91</sup> Israel centralized communication efforts of its agencies with underneath a structure called "*hasbara*." The Israeli government views *hasbara* as an attempt to "explain" its positions through this whole-of-government (and in some ways a whole-of-nation) philosophy. This word translates literally as 'explanation' and more loosely as 'public diplomacy,'<sup>92</sup> though it has become a loaded word that also sometimes connotes spin or propaganda.<sup>93</sup> In practice, *hasbara* actually more closely resembles the American concept of 'strategic communication' than public diplomacy, in that it seeks to harmonize the nation's actions with its messages. Like the US, Israel has a wide variety of stakeholders with responsibilities for internal and external messaging ("the IDF Spokesman's Office, the National Information Bureau, the Public Diplomacy Ministry, the Foreign Ministry's public affairs consuls, the Government Press Office, the Jewish Agency and various voluntary Jewish organizations").<sup>94</sup> Although Operation Pillar of Defense made the IDFSpokesperson the most prominent social media voice in the Israeli structure, it is one of many centrally-directed *hasbara* tools.

The most significant reform of the centralized *hasbara* system is the National Information Directorate, which coordinates the activities of various bodies and reports directly to the Prime Minister's office.<sup>95</sup> This system works well because it provides a single body with the authority to direct Israel's interagency communication efforts. The feature that most differentiates the Israeli approach from the American approach is that the National Information Directorate "acts across ministries and decides key messages on a daily basis."<sup>96</sup> National-level *hasbara* attempts to be so comprehensive that it includes "bodies such as friendship leagues, Jewish communities, bloggers and backers using online networks."<sup>97</sup> Moreover, it conducts contingency planning in anticipation of conflicts and conducts national-level exercising among its various components.<sup>98</sup> IDFSpokesperson and other information agencies often have material on hand to anticipate likely adversary information tactics.<sup>99</sup> The combinative effect of extensive preparation and daily integration provides the Israeli government centralized command and decentralized execution of its strategic communication plans, which is essential to the speed required for social media work.

America's SC system, in contrast, is markedly uncoordinated. Many of its problems can be traced back to the dissolution of the US Information Agency after the Cold War, which "left a fractured and under-funded public diplomacy system."<sup>100</sup> The government felt that there was simply no need to communicate America's position to the world. After the crisis of 9/11, a multitude of reports decried the US government's fragmented and chaotic strategic communication. According to a highly critical 2005 Defense Science Board (DSB) report on the national SC structure, all interested parties must "move beyond outdated concepts, stale structural models, and institutionally-based labels. Public diplomacy, public affairs, [PSYOP], and open military information operations must be coordinated and energized."<sup>101</sup> A 2005 GAO

report made substantially similar observations and recommendations.<sup>102</sup> While the Bush Administration seems to have supported the goal of reforming the SC infrastructure, most of its initiatives were ineffective.

More than ineffective, the issue turned politically radioactive. The public battle over the DoD's short-lived Office of Strategic Influence highlights exactly how controversial this subject can be.<sup>103</sup> Even when the Bush Administration strongly supported efforts to "influence" audiences abroad (American audiences would not have been targeted), there was no concurrent support from either Congress or the public. In fact, the term "influence" itself has become political code for "propaganda," as shown by the reaction to a contract designed to study "strategic influence."<sup>104</sup> The Obama Administration even eliminated the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Support to Public Diplomacy position because of its association with OSI.<sup>105</sup> It is unlikely that any changes in roles, responsibilities, or authorities will occur because the American public would never support an expansion of the military's influence activities.

This episode demonstrated the political costs that might be incurred by trying to create any kind of information agency, and probably explains the reluctance of both the Bush and Obama administrations to spend the required political capital to make large systemic changes. The White House did release a national SC framework in 2010, but only because it was forced to do so by Congressional legislation. Significantly, while the law required a national SC 'strategy,' the administration provided a 'framework.'<sup>106</sup> This framework emphasizes "synchronization" and "deliberate communication and engagement," and references a vaguely defined, non-specific, "intuitive planning process for national-level priorities that attempts to bridge the individual processes of departments and agencies," but has not established a national-level coordination mechanism to handle day-to-day national communication efforts.<sup>107</sup> If

anything, the White House's 2012 update to the framework complicated the issue further by giving the "Department of State...primacy in communications and engagement outside the combat zones" without creating the authority to assume that primacy.<sup>108</sup>

This is not necessarily a failure, because there are relatively few palatable policy choices available. While the Strategic Communication Framework institutionalized some 2005 Defense Science Board recommendations by creating the position of Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communication (NSA/SC). This would seem to be a significant change in policy, but in practice the NSA/SC mostly performs duties related to White House speechwriting and public affairs, and does not have day-to-day oversight of the interagency SC plan.<sup>109</sup> Most routine coordination occurs at the level of the Strategic Communication Interagency Policy Committee.<sup>110</sup> One option would be to empower the NSA/SC to coordinate national-level communication programs and provide day-to-day coordination and integration of SC themes and messages to both the DoD and State Departments. But this would, in effect, "operationalize" the National Security Staff, requiring a significant expansion of its scope and authority.

Other approaches advocate the creation of an independent coordination body. This body could take the form of an independent, not-for-profit independent organization (as the DSB report recommends), or as a sort of fusion center. The White House rejected the non-profit option in its 2010 framework, probably because it does not solve the fundamental problem of centralizing the authority required to direct the activities of two powerful departments. It did, however, experiment with a fusion center by creating the Strategic Counterterrorism Communications Initiative with Executive Order 13584.<sup>111</sup> Rather than addressing issues based on national borders, language, or operational level, this changes the mental model significantly by focusing on a particular line of effort. The creation of the coordination center reflects the

importance of counterterrorism in foreign policy, and represents a marked improvement in the current structure, but does not affect future conflict areas and still lacks authority.

### **The Difficulties of Innovation**

Despite the pressures of ten years of constant war, neither the military nor its civilian overseers have been able to innovate in the realm of social media. The current approach of applying old doctrine to new technology does cause actual harm by wasting resources on ineffective initiatives. Military PA's efforts to use social media productively have produced few results because most of its experience comes from established broadcast media platforms, such as news articles highlighting service activities and informational television ads produced for the Pentagon Channel and Armed Forces Network. In practice, much of the benefit of using social media comes from creating media rather than reacting to the media—Israel's success in breaking news stories on Twitter is a reflection of an explicit strategy of inserting its own version of events into the news cycle before traditional mass media can pick it up.<sup>112</sup> US Central Command's (CENTCOM) "Digital Engagement Teams" demonstrate how even well-intentioned efforts at small-scale innovation are ineffective.

While most efforts to use social media focus on proactively providing information to the public, some organizations attempt to directly counteract negative publicity and opinions found in online forums. These efforts are designed to reduce the "Echo chamber" effect that can occur when people continually seek out information that confirms their own view of the world. In 2008, USCENTCOM established Digital Engagement Teams (DETs) to scour foreign news websites, blogs, and other media venues in 20 different languages to correct misinformation and disinformation.<sup>113</sup> This effort is virtually identical to a State Department project called the

“Digital Outreach Team,” which attempts to “engage extremists in online conversations,”<sup>114</sup> and is staffed entirely by native speakers in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. Both efforts openly acknowledge their affiliation with the US government in an attempt to preserve transparency and establish legitimacy.<sup>115</sup>

Even though there is no academic research about the DET, what we know about the DOT should be equally applicable. It shows that these efforts face two primary limitations. First, the scale of such any such effort is daunting. Millions of comments are made each day, and scouring the internet to find articles or comments that are worth refuting or supporting is time-consuming and effort-intensive. One study noted that the State Department’s DOT took an average of 2.77 days to respond to other users’ posts because they are obligated to fact-check posts and clear their comments with supervisors.<sup>116</sup> Second, there is the limitation of credibility. The DOT study noted that its operators predominantly used logical textual arguments, avoided religious argument, and attempted to refute and engage their target audiences. Posts written in response to the DOT’s efforts often took a ridiculing tone, tended to include religious arguments, and quite often used visual or multimedia posts as a form of counter-argument.<sup>117</sup> Negativity tended to rise in response to the DOT’s efforts (though it is worth noting that this does not necessarily mean that the project was failing). Additionally, insurgent and terrorist groups have begun to actively target these DOT communications.<sup>118</sup>

Here again, Israel’s *hasbara* strategy seems much better suited to social media’s distributed structure because it encourages ordinary citizens and the Jewish Diaspora to participate directly. By harnessing the power of volunteers, Israel trades active control of its message in order to overcome the limitations of scale and credibility. By incorporating outreach programs to volunteer organizations as part of the national *hasbara* program, the Israeli

government operates with a remarkable unity of effort when communicating its positions. After Operation Cast Lead, Israel's "Foreign Ministry recruited undercover volunteers to deliver the state-sponsored war message to the Internet public...focused on websites originating in Europe, where audiences were thought to be particularly hostile to Israel."<sup>119</sup> This mass mobilization of both the Israeli public and the Jewish diaspora has become a cornerstone of the IDF's information strategy: "We gather Twitter followers in times of peace, so that they are ready to disseminate our message when we are at war."<sup>120</sup> A better and more recent example of this philosophy is the "IDF Ranks" online game (tagline: "IDF Ranks—the ultimate virtual army"), which is distinguishable from more conventional and essentially passive efforts to build a large number of 'follows' or 'likes' on social networking sites.<sup>121</sup>

Since overt social media attempts to counter negative publicity are dubious, there have been suggestions that this kind of effort should be done covertly.<sup>122</sup> Perceptions are exceedingly difficult to change, even when they are misperceptions based on misinformation—in fact, some research suggests that attempts to change people's political views might actually be counter-productive.<sup>123</sup> Interestingly, there is evidence that CENTCOM's IO program, Operation Earnest Voice, includes a much more secretive program designed to manipulate social media. This \$2.76 million program is a technical contract that creates "false online personalities...[with] a convincing background, history and supporting details" to allow "up to 50 US-based controllers...to operate false identities."<sup>124</sup> This technique, known as "sock-puppetry" in internet circles, is also thought to be widely used by the Russian "Web Brigades" and the Chinese "50 Cent Army."<sup>125</sup> Notably, though CENTCOM says that it will conduct all of its activities overseas in foreign languages, several people have been prosecuted within the US for criminal impersonation and forgery using sockpuppets.<sup>126</sup> However, the lack of political outrage over this

effort's propagandistic possibilities indicates that there should be space in the political and policy spheres to pursue doctrinal innovation.

These programs are a microcosm of the problems plaguing the US government SC structure. First, these programs have basic design flaws in the context of social media that limit their effectiveness as an overt instrument of military PA. The DET effort seems better suited to MISO, especially since the relevant academic research indicates that the overt approach may be misguided. PA personnel must engage in a time- and resource-consuming vetting process to ensure their credibility remains untarnished. Rather than being truly innovative, the DET represents the incremental adaptation of old doctrine to new technology. Second, the simultaneous existence of the DET and the DOT reflect the inherently poor national-level approach to SC. Since both efforts are directed against Islamist extremism, they should theoretically coordinate through the CSCC created by Executive Order 13584. Yet there is no obvious explanation for the bureaucratic redundancy two departments operating the same program, and there is no "tie-breaker" with the authority to resolve conflicts between these two teams. In other words, the DET has yet to show a significant impact, reproduces the efforts of another agency, and seems to be more appropriate to MISO than to PA.

### **Conclusions**

Even without significant changes in the underlying doctrine, the military could certainly do more to enhance its social media presence. Of all the services, the US Marine Corps currently has a structure that is most suited to develop a social media unit along these lines. It has its own MISO operators, who fall centrally under the Marine Corps Information Operations Center and are distributed to the Marine Expeditionary Forces as required. This system allows for the

smooth transfer of forces between the Marine Corps that organizes, trains, and equips its MISO units with the combatant commanders that utilize them. It would therefore be easier to create a centralized Marine Corps social media unit that operates the service-specific social media platforms, while simultaneously providing social media expertise to Marine commanders. Ideally, a social media unit would be stationed at Quantico in order to coordinate with both the MCIOC and the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity.

This experimental unit should focus on drawing together the appropriate skill sets to fully leverage the new media. The unit team leaders should be an experienced Public Affairs Officer. This is necessary to place the entire program under PA, which would be legally necessary to adhere to DoD policy regarding social media and to avoid having to request separate and specific IO authorizations. However, the unit's deputy should be an Information Operations officer with MISO experience. Notionally, this officer would be providing advice and assistance in conducting social media operations with an enhanced focus on effects-based operations. Commanders have wide latitude to coordinate the communication efforts of their PA and MISO activities, but the social media unit must hew closely to the letter of the law by being truthful in order to respect the legal prohibition against propaganda. This is not an entirely radical idea—the Army is already drawing PA and MISO closer together with its new IIA doctrine, so it would not be a significant stretch to start putting that doctrine into practice.

The ideal social media unit would include an information collection function as well as a communication function. This intelligence function should include specially selected experts with an intelligence background to conduct target audience and effects analysis, as well as prepare military information for exploitation. Social media offers exciting new opportunities to collect and analyze data about audiences and media effects, though these areas are still

experimental and underdeveloped. But the more important function, and the more radical approach, would be the content development piece that turns operational efforts into information efforts. This would be similar in many ways to the Israeli system, which has a system to fast-track media products generated by military activities for distribution on social media platforms. Because of its prominence and experimental nature, the social media unit should be as skilled as possible. Ideally, this unit would include personnel selected especially for their media experience or talent, rather than military professionals re-purposed from other career fields or randomly selected from traditional PA. The assignment should be considered career-enhancing.

The reason for building a unique social media unit with idiosyncratic skills is to address the primary weakness of social media strategies for large organizations, which is that they focus primarily on pushing out the message that the organization wants to get out, rather than publishing something that the public wants to consume—they “overemphasize the use of new media for growing the supply side without giving almost any consideration to its possible impact on the demand side.”<sup>127</sup> In order to be successful with social media, one has to create something that the public wants to consume and propagate. Because this more often than not means cute cat pictures and videos of people doing the cinnamon challenge, the primary challenge for a military social media unit will be to produce content that the public is actually interested in. Ironically, the military produces interesting material in abundance (combat camera footage, etc.), but for various reasons keeps this material tightly held. Using the Israeli model would involve changing an entrenched resistance to using this material, as well as approval oversight from an authority with the ability to rapidly de-classify content and approve messages for release, in order to provide appropriate operational security while maximizing speed.

Perhaps the most intriguing military application for social media is its use in coordinating humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and (more specific to the Marine Corps) noncombatant evacuation operations. These operations could benefit from the improved collection and integration of intelligence about individuals and requirements, as well as a communication function with a high level of specificity, such as reassuring those in need or directing survivors to take certain actions (relief locations, evacuation routes, etc.). The use of social media in natural disasters has already shown great promise, but these efforts have been ad hoc and responsive. A dedicated social media unit could formalize existing best practices and find ways to improve existing capabilities. Crises create a flight to quality when it comes to information, and organizations like the Boston Police Department have found that a competent social media effort can drastically increase followership, which increases the efficacy and impact of routine social media efforts.

Of course, positive outreach is only half of the possibility. Evgeny Morozov suggests that social media might be best employed in “a sort of brand war,” where the US government isn’t trying so much to promote itself as it is trying to discredit its adversaries.<sup>128</sup> MISO already performs this function in certain circumstances, though not in a widespread and highly public campaign to discredit a geopolitical adversary (al Qaeda or Bashar al Assad or China). As Morozov points out, the problem isn’t so much that the American brand isn’t available; it’s that foreign audiences feel like the brand is “empty.”<sup>129</sup> Israel has undertaken this ‘brand war’ strategy, but it often suffers from its association with Israeli policy: “one cannot attribute Israel’s poor international status and image to insufficient and inefficient hasbara...the “hasbara problem” is a myth that diverts focus from Israel’s real problems which are the results of problematic policy, not flawed hasbara of appropriate policy.”<sup>130</sup> So long as national policies are

unpopular, the best bang-to-buck approach may be to “go negative.” Mud-slinging politicians, the world’s original influencers, are already familiar with this ugly truth about information.

As the US winds down its efforts in Afghanistan, the military will probably focus even less on its communication strategy. Our immediate future seems filled with budget cuts, personnel reductions, and difficult choices regarding expensive weapons programs. History predicts that public communication programs such as the Office of Wartime Information and the US Information Agency are among the first cuts after conflicts end. Yet it is important to get social media right in the future, even though there are no concrete “best practices” to guide its efforts. The information landscape is changing too fast to ignore, and our current and possibly future adversaries are becoming very smart in how they use it to their advantage. We would be foolish to ignore its possibilities, despite the institutional obstacles to innovation and the somewhat doubtful prospect of achieving some kind of categorical social media victory. Sometimes, it is better to do something imperfectly than to do nothing at all.

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